

UNEQUAL FRIENDSHIP: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE  
POLISH-EAST GERMAN OPEN BORDER, 1972-1980.

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## ABSTRACT

MICHAEL A. SKALSKI: Unequal Friendship: Economic and Social Differences  
across the Polish-East German Open Border, 1972-1980  
(Under the direction of Konrad H. Jarausch)

In 1972, Poland and the German Democratic Republic opened their mutual border to free travel. Although this arrangement worked for some time, tensions arose quickly contributing to the closing of the border in 1980. This thesis explores the economic, political, and social reasons for the malfunctioning of the open border in order to shed light on the relationship between Poland and East Germany in particular, and between society and dictatorship in general. It reveals that differences in economic conditions and ideological engagement in both countries resulted in mass buy-outs of East German goods and transnational contacts of dissidents, which alienated segments of the population and threatened the stability of the system. Seeing open borders as an important element of the “welfare dictatorship,” this study concludes that the GDR was reluctant to close the border again. Only fear of opposition developing in Poland forced the SED to rescind the free-travel agreement.

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## MAP



Map 1 – Border between the German Democratic Republic and Polish People's Republic 1972-1980, drawn by Michael A. Skalski

## INTRODUCTION

At midnight, January 1, 1972, bells chimed and fireworks lit up the sky over Frankfurt on Oder and Ślubice not only to herald the start of a new year, but also the start of a new era in Polish-East German relations. The First Secretary of the regional Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and the Head of the Regional Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) shook hands on the "Bridge of Peace" over the Oder River, initiating passport and visa free travel between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Polish People's Republic (PPR). Within the first fifteen minutes, some one hundred citizens crossed the previously strictly policed "Border of Friendship" only on the basis of an identification card. In the morning hours, thousands of curious Poles and East Germans went for walks in the neighboring towns, visiting museums, eating in cafes, and making new friends. The state press in the PPR and GDR rejoiced over the opening of the border and the opportunities for closer political and social cooperation in the spirit of socialism. As one inhabitant of Frankfurt put it, she was joyful that the "citizens of the two friendly countries can now learn to better understand each other."<sup>1</sup> Once the initial euphoria dampened, however, the reality proved to be more troubling than expected.

The significance of this event cannot be overstated. On the one hand, two nations with a very troubled past had an opportunity to interact freely for the first time since the Second World War. Although political ideology tried to erase the stigmas of Nazism and expulsions by

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<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Schmidt, "Visafrei in die Volksrepublik Polen," *Berliner Zeitung*, 2 January 1972; "Über Brücken des Frieden kommen Freunde zueinander," *Neues Deutschland*, 2 January 1972; "Pierwsi turyści z dowodami," *Trybuna Ludu*, 2 January 1972; "Tysiące turystów na przejściach granicznych PRL i NRD," *Trybuna Ludu*, 4 January 1972.

imposing on all communist societies the idea of internationalist friendship, historical experiences were still present in popular memory. Free travel, then, would serve as a litmus test for probing the extent to which friendship as imagined by the two regimes was possible. On the other hand, the opening of the border was a radical experiment in dictatorial control. Territorial borders are an intrinsic element of any authoritarian regime; they particularly characterized the GDR, whose existence rested on tight borders.<sup>2</sup> A *de facto* removal of border control, however, has the potential to unmask the internal limits of a dictatorship – *Die Grenzen der Diktatur* to apply Thomas Lindenberger’s phrase.<sup>3</sup> Unrestricted travel, therefore, opened a window for the citizens to exercise Lüdtkean *Eigen-Sinn* and pursue “independent needs, interests, and practices of one’s own making”<sup>4</sup> within the rigidity, brutality, and “thorough rule”<sup>5</sup> of the Polish and East German *Unrechtsstaaten*.

This study contributes to a better understanding of socialist society, politics, and internal relations within the Eastern Bloc by explaining the history of a special kind of a border between two socialist dictatorships. The Polish-East German case represents a certain anomaly within the Communist Bloc, in which national borders were strictly controlled. In the early phases, the open border fulfilled many of the set goals of closer cooperation and rapprochement. But over time,

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<sup>2</sup> Dominik Trutkowski, *Der geteilte Ostblock: Die Grenzen der SBZ/DDR zu Polen und der Tschechoslowakei* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2011), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, “Die Diktatur der Grenzen: Zur Einleitung,” in *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur: Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR*, Thomas Lindenberger, ed. (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999), 26-36.

<sup>4</sup> Alf Lüdtke, “What Happened to the ‘Fiery Red Glow’? Worker’s Experiences and German Fascism” in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, Alf Lüdtke, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 198-251. A similar notion appears in Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, “Grenzen überschreiten: Die Kontakte zwischen Oppositionellen aus Polen und der DDR” in *Die DDR und die Solidarność: Ausgewählte Aspekte einer Beziehung*, Konstantin Hermann, ed. (Dresden: Thelem, 2013), 26.

<sup>5</sup> I see the concept of *durchherrschte Gesellschaft* as applicable to both states in question, for they sought to extend the hegemony of their institutional ideology and unopposed rule to the whole of the society, as described by Jürgen Kocka, „Ein deutscher Sonderweg: Überlegungen zur Sozialgeschichte der DDR“ in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, No. 40, (1994), 34-45.



social and political tensions arose leading eventually to the suspension of free travel in 1980. The question that emerges is, why had the open-border project worked for a while, and then malfunctioned? The answer requires a multifaceted analysis of the interactions of individual and state actors, who took advantage or oversaw the East German-Polish border during the late Cold War.

First, this work examines the relations between ordinary Poles and East Germans - how did the different national circumstances contribute to their usage of the border and attitudes toward their neighbors? The realities of real existing socialism, including national economy, standard of living, unemployment, and ideological outlook, were more different than similar in the GDR and PPR. These factors influenced how each side perceived the opportunities offered by an open border and restructured popular opinions about the neighbor. The citizens who treated the Border of Friendship as such, often succeeded in establishing long-lasting social connections, whether professional, romantic, or dissident in nature. On the other hand, those who saw the open border as a gateway to a shopping paradise or a liberal safe haven, more often managed to alienate their neighbors and strengthen the stereotypes about the two countries.

Second, by investigating the changing border policy, I want to shed light on the political relations between the GDR and PPR. How did the open border – and the maintenance it required – shape inter-state cooperation, and why did the attempts to stabilize the situation fail in the end? As most scholars point out, Polish-East German relations from 1949 through 1970 had merely a friendly façade. Only during the following decade was meaningful cooperation achieved.<sup>6</sup> The decision to open the border, followed by an increase in common cultural, economic, and political projects, attests to the improvement of relations. However, on the micro-level of management the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Katarzyna Stokłosa, *Polen und die deutsche Ostpolitik 1945-1990* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2011), 345; Trutkowski, 11.

unequal economic conditions and ideological engagement of the elites in the two neighboring states inhibited deeper cooperation. Although during the last four years of the open border's existence the economic and political predicaments might have overshadowed the benefits, the East German and Polish authorities tried hard to salvage the project and thereby their own political interests. The case of the open border reflects therefore both the positive and negative aspects of their official relations.

Third, an analysis of the functioning of the open border will serve as a lens to observe the relations between state and society. How did an open border between two restrictive, dictatorial systems function and how did the freedom to travel inform socio-political relations? These relations were often reciprocal. People's creativity allowed them to find loopholes in the policy or break the law to take advantage of unrestricted travel for personal gain, which affected the functioning of the Border of Friendship. In order to accommodate these changes, the powers-that-be had to balance between tighter control and appeasement to legitimize their authority in the process. The notion of a "consensus dictatorship"<sup>7</sup> therefore fits the characteristics of Poland and East Germany in the 1970s well. At that time, the two regimes moved away from relying on physical repression in favor of soft power to obtain conformity. In Poland, this soft power demonstrated itself primarily in the attempts to raise the material standard of living;<sup>8</sup> in the GDR, the regime tried to "force its citizens to achieve happiness" by expanding welfare programs and other social services.<sup>9</sup> The open border became, in part, a means to achieve these goals.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Sabrow, *Das Diktat des Konsenses: Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR, 1949-1969* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001), 446.

<sup>8</sup> Konstantin Hermann, "'Die Polen sind genial im Erfinden von Ausflüchten: Wirtschaftliche Beziehungen zwischen Polen und der DDR in der Zeit der Krise (1977-1982),'" in Hermann, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Konrad H. Jarausch, "Care and Coercion: the GDR as Welfare Dictatorship" in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, K.H. Jarausch, ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 60.

This work builds upon and contributes to historiography of the interrelated fields. The majority of scholarship focuses on individual countries and the peculiarities of their regimes. Undeniably, the histories of the GDR and PPR present very different cases due to the specific national circumstances such as the influence of the Federal Republic of Germany, wider popular support for the regime in East Germany and the independence of the Catholic Church and lax collectivization policies in Poland.<sup>10</sup> Only recently have historians begun to move away from single nation studies to establish not only comparisons but also connections among the countries of the Eastern Bloc. Włodzimierz Borodziej and Paulina Bren, among others, investigated the bottom-up phenomena of rising consumer culture, black market, tourism, and intellectual opposition to suggest that many of the contacts between socialist societies had an unofficial character, which operated within the framework of dictatorial rule, but which at the same time undermined the regimes through their activities.<sup>11</sup> Other scholars, such as Rachel Applebaum, suggest that the top-down ideology of socialist internationalism played a significant role in establishing contacts among East Europeans.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to Polish-German relations, a large body of works has been devoted to political history. The relations between Warsaw and Bonn have dominated the discourse,

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jens Gieseke, *Die Stasi, 1945-1989* (Munich: Panteon, 2001); Monika Kaiser *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker: Funktionsmechanismen der SED-Diktatur in Konfliktsituationen 1962-1972* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm: nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2001); Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Włodzimierz Borodziej, Jerzy Kochanowski, eds., *Bocznymi Drogami: Nieoficjalne kontakty społeczeństw socjalistycznych, 1956-1989* (Warszawa: IH UW, 2010); Helmut Fehr, *Unabhängige Öffentlichkeit und soziale Bewegungen: Fallstudien über Bürgerbewegungen in Polen und der DDR* (Opladen: Leske&Budrich, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Rachel Applebaum, "The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s" in *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015), 484-507.

reflecting the scholarly interest in inter-bloc politics.<sup>13</sup> The access to the documents of the former German Democratic Republic in the 1990s allowed historians, like Krzysztof Ruchniewicz to examine also the triangular relationship between the FRG-GDR-PPR, demonstrating that this interconnectedness provides more exhaustive perspectives on international relations during the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> The discourse around the intra-bloc relations between the GDR and PPR focused on the idea of “friendship,” described as either “forced,” “imagined,” or “dictated,” thus, rejecting any notions of a genuine friendship.<sup>15</sup>

Although comparative studies of socialist dictatorships are still in emerging stages, professional collaboration among Polish and German historians under the aegis of the Willy Brandt Center (Wrocław), the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (Potsdam) or the Hannah-Arendt-Institute for Research on Totalitarianism (Dresden) has yielded many fresh perspectives for understanding the social and political relations between the two countries. Katarzyna Stokłosa’s macro- and micro-level studies of the Polish-German neighborhood historicize the issues previously dominated by sociological examinations.<sup>16</sup> While Ehrhart Neubert and Piotr Zariczny have examined the contacts between Polish and East German dissidents,<sup>17</sup> Tytus

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. Bingen, *Polenpolitik der Bonner Republik von Adenauer bis Kohl* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1998); Wanda Jarząbek, *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa wobec polityki wschodniej Republiki Federalnej Niemiec w latach 1966-1976* (Warsaw: ISP PAN, 2011). Stokłosa, *Ostpolitik*; and Mieczysław Tomala, *Deutschland- von Polen gesehen: zu den deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen 1949-1990* (Marburg: Schüren, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, *Warszawa-Berlin-Bonn, Stosunki polityczne 1949-1958* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UW, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Mehlhorn, "Przyjaźń nakazana. Rozwój stosunków między NRD a PRL w latach 1949-1990" in *Przyjaźń nakazana? Stosunki między NRD i Polską w latach 1949-1990*, Basil Kerski, Andrzej Kotula, eds. (Wrocław: ATUT, 2009), 37-42; Jan Behrends, *Erfundene Freundschaft: Propaganda für die Sowjetunion in Polen und in der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006); Natalia Jackowska "Spór graniczny NRD-PRL w Zatoce Pomorskiej" *Przegląd Zachodni* (3/2008), 151.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Katarzyna Stokłosa, *Grenzstädte in Ostmitteleuropa: Guben und Gubin 1945 bis 1995* (Berlin: BWV, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Piotr Zariczny, *Opozycja w NRD i w PRL – wzajemne relacje i oceny* (Gdańsk: ECS, 2013), Erhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR, 1949-1989* (Berlin, Ch. Links, 1997). Also, Konstantin Hermann, ed., *Die DDR und die Solidarność*.

Jaskułowski has investigated the relationship between the secret services, concluding that the Polish security apparatus was not as weak as the Stasi perceived it to be. However, by the summer of 1980, he argues, the tensions between the two counterparts reached a level that forced the GDR regime to treat the PPR as a hostile country.<sup>18</sup> Looking at borders between the GDR, PPR, and Czechoslovakia, Dominik Trutkowski suggests, moreover, the notion of a “divided Eastern Bloc.”<sup>19</sup> He deconstructs the picture of a single, unified socialist community, showing that the nature of policed borders (with the exception of the open-border period in the 1970s) alienated the societies and limited political cooperation hinged only on the propaganda of “friendship.”

This study is based on an analysis of sources from the Federal Commission for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR (BStU) in Berlin and the Institute for National Remembrance (IPN) in Warsaw. At first glance, a focus on the documents of the East German Ministry for State Security (MfS, Stasi) and the Polish Ministry of the Interior (MSW) may seem limiting in that they appear to exclude some important voices. Since the MfS was responsible for supervising the border as well as gathering domestic and foreign intelligence, it had a monopoly on shaping the party-state perception of the free travel experience and the ultimate decision to close the border in 1980. This dynamic raises the question, were the Stasi’s own concerns reflecting real security threats or did they appeal to the culture of fear prevalent among ideologues like Erich Mielke, the head of the MfS, fundamentally opposed to liberalization. It is important, then, to keep in mind that the higher a certain report was sent, the

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<sup>18</sup> Tytus Jaskułowski, *Przyjaźń, której nie było: Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego NRD wobec MSW, 1974-1990* (Warsaw: WUW, 2014), 491.

<sup>19</sup> Trutkowski.

more it deviated from the truth in order to satisfy the party bosses.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of the highest echelons then, the assessments of the security apparatus are not as saturated with propagandistic elements as official political sources tend to be. The state, inasmuch as it wanted to deny the reality in favor of imagined successes, still needed to be aware of the actual situation on the ground. Nevertheless, the nature of the security apparatus, to use Mary Fulbrook's analogy, was the "nerve system and brain center" of the state, monitoring and controlling any and all information it could obtain.<sup>21</sup> The view from the security services allows then for a reconstruction of a wide spectrum of political and social actions.

After a brief description of Polish-East German relations until 1972 and the process of arranging for the open border, this study will concentrate on two factors influential for the events in the later half of the 1970s. The second section will focus on the economic disparity between the GDR and PPR and explain the consequences this inequality had on the functioning of the border. The following part will investigate the approaches undertaken by the two regimes to overcome the negative effects of economic tourism. In the fourth section, this study takes a turn to the social aspects of the free travel agreement. Pointing out to the socio-ideological differences between the GDR and PPR, it will elaborate on the results of heightened interactions between the two nations. Then, it will analyze the state responses to a particular kind of social contacts, namely those that were deemed as subversive. Finally, a discussion of the process of the closing of the border in October 1980 will suggest a new interpretation for that event.

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<sup>20</sup> Gieseke, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Fulbrook, 53.

## The Border of Friendship

Born out of the legacy of the Second World War and the Potsdam Conference in 1945, the ensuing Polish-German demarcation line on the Oder and Neisse Rivers became a central point of contention in the European Cold War. While some West German politicians and organizations demanded a revision of the status quo,<sup>22</sup> similar debates about the Oder-Neisse border took place within the Socialist Unity Party of Germany. There too citizens hoped to return to their homelands in Poland.<sup>23</sup> However, in order to legitimize their claim to create an anti-fascist state disinherited from the legacy of the Third Reich, the newly founded GDR succumbed to the pressures of the Soviet Union and accepted the status quo in the Görlitz Treaty of 1950.<sup>24</sup> It was this agreement that gave rise to the slogan of the “Border of Peace and Friendship.”

Polish-East German relations in the immediate twenty-five years after the war were, in fact, filled with unfriendly disputes. The most persistent disagreement pertained to the interpretation and implementation of Marxism-Leninism. The leaderships of the SED and the PZPR differed in their approach to realizing communism. Mary Fulbrook has ascribed a “Prussian complexion” to the SED, making it into a “model of efficiency and discipline.”<sup>25</sup> This characteristic is especially striking in comparison with the Polish Communists, who were not only more nationally oriented, but also pursued more liberal policies over issues such as

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<sup>22</sup> E.g., Bingen, 11-14. The justification behind non-recognition of the Oder-Neisse line was based on the belief that the Potsdam agreements were only temporary and an eventual peace settlement would permanently settle the territorial questions.

<sup>23</sup> Stokłosa, *Ostpolitik*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Sheldon Anderson, *A Cold War in the Soviet Bloc: Polish-East German Relations 1945-1962* (Boulder: Westview, 2001), 5. Burkhard Olschowsky, “Stosunki państwowe pomiędzy NRD a PRL w latach 1949-1990” in Kerski, 43-45.

<sup>25</sup> Fulbrook, 31.

censorship, collectivization, religion, and tourism.<sup>26</sup> These ideological and practical differences created a deep political rift between the GDR and PRP that persisted until 1989 and were particularly visible in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of these differences, the new generation of leaders that came to power at the beginning of the decade contributed substantially to the improvement of relations between the two states. Erich Honecker in the GDR and Edward Gierek in the PPR overcame the political quarrels of Ulbricht and Gomułka. Concretely, the early 1970s meant a much more intense economic, technological, cultural, and political cooperation on a national and international level. And yet, more was being said and shown to the public than done and each side pursued its national interests without consulting the other.<sup>28</sup> This notwithstanding, the closer cooperation born in the atmosphere of the détente and initiated by Honecker and Gierek resulted in opening the border.

The open border project was Honecker's personal idea. It aimed on the one hand at increasing socialist cooperation as a way of realizing the GDR's policy of demarcation (*Abgrenzung*) from the Federal Republic (FRG), in response to the West German new *Ostpolitik* making forays into the socialist bloc.<sup>29</sup> On the other, the easing of travel restrictions portrayed the SED First Secretary as more liberal. The East German leader was aware of social pressures for liberalization, "especially the necessity to extend the liberty of foreign travel."<sup>30</sup> This necessity arose from popular desires to travel to West Germany, which at that point was possible

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<sup>26</sup> Zaremba, 82, 356.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Anderson, 4-6.

<sup>28</sup> Stokłosa, *Ostpolitik*, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Stokłosa, *Ostpolitik*, 343, and Jarząbek, 271.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Gierek, *Smak życia: pamiątniki* (Warsaw: BGW, 1993), 179.



only to a select few as well as older, retired people. Hence, Honecker asked Gierek for help in opening the eastern frontier.<sup>31</sup>

The Polish leader's motivations to accept this offer also require some consideration. He himself generously characterized his stance as "a desire to help the justified aspirations of the citizens of the GDR."<sup>32</sup> Scholars correctly point out, however, that Gierek and the PZPR were more pragmatic.<sup>33</sup> An open border with the GDR was both helpful in outsourcing the material needs of his citizens, as well as tightening political cooperation and thereby calming Polish fears of German-German rapprochement and potential reunification.<sup>34</sup> Despite these pragmatic goals, one should not doubt that the spirit of international socialism and the desire for social rapprochement played a role. Uninhibited travel demonstrated the level of confidence the two states had in their people that Poland and East Germany relaxed entry and exit controls at their frontiers, even though they separated such economically and culturally different countries.

The opening of the border on January 1, 1972 was a radical step that literally opened the previously strictly policed border. The resulting agreement signed on November 25, 1971 outlined the parameters of the passport- and visa-free border crossing. According to Article 4 of the agreement, a personal identification card was sufficient to travel and remain in the other state for up to three months, which was a true liberalization of policy.<sup>35</sup> The hard-to-obtain passport

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Tomala, 512; and Mark Keck-Szajbel, "Shop around the Bloc: Trader Tourism and Its Discontents on the East German-Polish Border" in Bren and Neuberger, 374-390.

<sup>34</sup> Stokłosa, *Ostpolitik*, 350.

<sup>35</sup> Agreement between the Government of the Peoples Republic of Poland and the Government of the German Democratic Republic about Mutual Travels of the Citizens of both States, Warsaw, 25 November, 1971. In *Dziennik Ustaw* [Journal of Law], 1971, vol. 35 no. 306. Accessed <http://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/du/1971/s/35/306/1>.

was not necessary anymore and because every adult citizen was required to have an identification card, virtually any Pole and East German to cross the Oder-Neisse line. Even if with time stricter regulations were imposed on the travelers, these pertained largely to the amount of currency brought in, customs control but not to the general rules for identity check.

The opening of the border was undoubtedly a very popular policy, at least initially. The level of social interactions rose significantly. For comparison, the number of Poles visiting the GDR in 1971 totaled only 200,000. In 1972 this number rose to nearly 9.5 million border crossings from Poland.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, East German tourists coming to Poland in 1971 numbered around 540,000; in 1972 the number reached 6.8 million. The intensity of traffic decreased somewhat in the later years and varied season to season (see Appendix 2), but still remained at high levels (Appendix 1 for an estimate). The opening of the border had also a significant impact on infrastructural improvements in the borderlands. Twenty-two new border crossings were opened within the first eight months of the passport free travel,<sup>37</sup> which required among other things construction of new roads and buildings. Moreover, the service sector also demanded improvements and extensions, leading to the building of multiple stores, kiosks, restaurants, and tourist accommodations not only in the border regions but also in renowned tourist destinations.<sup>38</sup> The borderlands, therefore, became transformed from a forbidding, militarized zone, into a region booming with foreign and national visitors.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jerzy Kochanowski, "Socjologiczny zwiad po otwarciu granicy PRL-NRD" in *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* Nr. 2 (2001), 236.

<sup>37</sup> B. Dewitz, Analyse des paß- und visafreien Reiseverkehrs, 24 January 1973, BStU, MfS HA VI, 4791, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ibid.; M. Krzak and R. Mager, Protokoll der 6. Tagung der Gemischten Kommission zur Koordinierung der Entwicklung des paß- und visafreien Reiseverkehrs und des Touristenaustausches, 29 June 1973, BStU, MfS HA IX, 5352, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Kochanowski, „Zwiad,“ 241-2; Julita Makaro, *Gubin – miasto graniczne: studium socjologiczne* (Wrocław: WUW, 2007) introduction and 82.

## Capitalism within socialism

Although the open border project had its successes, in the course of the decade increasing tensions preoccupied the party-state leaderships in the German Democratic Republic and Poland. The roots of these tensions lay primarily in the economic differences between the two countries. Financial realities were more favorable in the GDR than in the PPR. The standard of living for the East Germans improved considerably when compared to that of the Poles.<sup>40</sup> This material inequality manifested itself in an extensive and largely single-sided phenomenon of trader tourism. In order to supply themselves with goods unavailable at home, many Polish citizens shopped in the GDR. Unlike a free market, which would capitalize on extra consumers, planned economy did not account for an unexpected demand. Hence, increasing shortages of the coveted goods began to disturb the GDR's citizens in the borderlands and larger cities. The scale of trader tourism and the ineffective measures taken against it complicated the developing civic relations. Nevertheless, neither side proposed to curtail the freedom to travel right away.

With varying results, in the 1970s national economies of the GDR and the PPR took a policy turn toward consumer socialism. This evolution of socialism reflected an attempt to improve the living standard of the population with the hope that productivity and approval of the system would follow suit.<sup>41</sup> Relative liberalization of planned economies and introduction of new technologies in late 1960s spurred economic growth that allowed both Poland and East Germany to expand their welfare dictatorships. East Germany was in a relatively better position to pursue the experiment thanks to the investments in technological production, notably in the chemical and electronics sector under Ulbricht.<sup>42</sup> Even if this step had mixed results and many of

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<sup>40</sup> Fulbrook, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Andre Steiner, *The Plans that Failed: An Economic History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 143.

Ulbricht's reforms were subsequently weakened by the return to hardline orthodoxy under Honecker in the 1970s<sup>43</sup>, they certainly left the GDR's indexes of productivity and investments at higher levels than those of its eastern neighbor. More importantly, the GDR took advantage of its privileged relations with the Federal Republic that did not impose tariffs on East German exports.<sup>44</sup> Such relatively prosperous economy was crucial to the SED regime in particular, because scarred by the Uprising of June 17, 1953, the East German Communists preferred to ensure stability by avoiding any rapid changes to the social benefits package<sup>45</sup> – mistake they continued to observe being repeatedly made by their Polish colleagues.

In Poland, more liberal approaches to real existing socialism coupled with a lack of flexibility and insistence on heavy industry on the part of Edward Gierk resulted in higher levels of inefficiency, low or misplaced investments, and a deeper structural crisis, which remained hidden under a façade of apparent growth and prosperity.<sup>46</sup> In reality, store shelves were empty and queues for consumer goods always long. Thus, with the end of helping Polish citizens achieve a higher standard of living the regime took foreign credits and supported foreign travel and even encouraged fulfilling the material needs abroad.<sup>47</sup> Such “outsourcing of

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<sup>42</sup> Steiner, 119-132.

<sup>43</sup> Monika Kaiser, “Reforming Socialism? The Changing of the Guard from Ulbricht to Honecker during the 1960s” in Jarausch, 325-339.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hermann in Hermann, 39.

<sup>45</sup> On the lasting effects of the events of June 1953 on East German social and economic policy, see for example Fulbrook, 16, and Steiner, 142-145.

<sup>46</sup> Batara Simatupang, *Polish Economic Crisis: Background, Causes and Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 1993), 7; Wojciech Morawski, “Gospodarka epoki Gierka: między białą a czarną legendą” in *Dekada Gierka: blaski i cienie*, Paweł Bożyk, ed. (Warsaw: Kto jest kim, 2013), 119.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Keck-Szajbel, argues that Polish officials “were not only aware of the ‘trader tourist’ imbalance between Poland and East Germany but actually encouraged Polish citizens to take advantage of foreign abundance” in idem., 377. See also, Hermann, in Hermann, 44-45.

shortage” could explain the reluctance of the Polish state to undertake any decisive measures aimed at curbing trader tourism in the GDR.

In fact, mutual economic help developed successfully for some time, but soon after the opening of the border, the regimes lost control over the implementation of policy. In 1970-71, the PZPR regime planned to direct nearly six thousand people to work in East German industrial combines.<sup>48</sup> A political and economic maneuver of this sort benefited both sides. While East Berlin could regain some of the workforce lost to the West prior to 1961, while Warsaw could secure employment for at least some of its 1.7 million citizens needing jobs.<sup>49</sup> However, a few months after the opening of the border, the authorities in Zielona Góra voivodeship reported that representatives of East German combines advertised employment in food processing and textile plants in the neighboring Forst to the citizens of the county.<sup>50</sup> While such recruitment appears to have become the norm, the regime was disconcerted when skilled laborers quit their jobs in Poland just to take up employment in an analogous factory in the GDR. In a sense, the open border began to expose the deficiencies of plan economy through not only the lower social levels, but also the bosses of various people-owned enterprises. Above all, the situation began to reflect the limits of the regimes’ ability to control the purpose of transnational travel from the top.

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<sup>48</sup> Henryk Piętek, Informacja dotycząca zatrudnienia pracowników polskich w NRD, 13 September 1971, IPN BU 0365/102/1, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Alicja Solska, “Współpraca Polska-NRD,” *Trybuna Ludu*, 25 October 1971, 7.

<sup>50</sup> Komenda Powiatowa MO w Lubsku, Informacja o ruchu turystycznym..., 12 October 1972, IPN BU 0365/102/1, 68. The Polish side complained often that such a process takes place, in which even the directors of East German VEBs recruited inside of the PPR: for example, see Dietzsch, Vermerk über die Teilnahme an der 12. Tagung der gemischten Kommission..., 2 December 1976, BStU, MfS Abt. X, Nr. 8, 233.

The ubiquity of smugglers highlighted the states' lack of control and citizens' economic opportunism. While the process of obtaining goods abroad with the hope of circumventing customs duties was characteristic of the whole Eastern Bloc,<sup>51</sup> the period of the open border between the GDR and PPR witnessed an unprecedented rise in volume of transnational shopping. Both sides participated in smuggling,<sup>52</sup> but Poles constituted the majority of excessive trader tourists. The numbers fluctuated from month to month and temporarily dropped below average in the aftermath of the periodically strengthened customs regulations. In 1979 alone, 5,120,373 Poles crossed the border to the GDR and 3,524,782 East Germans to Poland.<sup>53</sup> Thirty-two percent of all investigations undertaken between 12.1978 and 11.1979 by the Customs Bureau (ZV) of the GDR concerned Polish citizens, which made them the single most numerous group of smugglers in East Germany.<sup>54</sup> Part of the explanation is the size of the population; there were more than twice as many Poles than East Germans – or for comparison – Czechoslovaks.<sup>55</sup> Their impact, therefore, was smaller and less noticeable. The problem, however, resulted from the fact that Poland, the largest of the three, was also the worst supplied, which points to the inadequacy of planned economy, as the reason for committing these customs infractions.

Shoppers abroad purchased anything that was unavailable, expensive, or of poorer quality on the domestic market. The ZV most frequently confiscated from its East German

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<sup>51</sup> Jerzy Kochanowski, "Pionierzy wolnego rynku? Nieoficjalna wymiana handlowa między społeczeństwami krajów socjalistycznych. Lata siedemdziesiąte i osiemdziesiąte," in Borodziej and Kochanowski, 109-144.

<sup>52</sup> The East Germans also brought goods over the official limit to and from the GDR, e.g. „Ausgewählte Beispiele zu Feststellungen des Schmuggels und Spekulation, Zeitraum Dezember 1977," BStU, MfS HA IX, 3612.

<sup>53</sup> Based on MfS tally recreated from BStU, MfS HA VI 16962, 16963, 16964.

<sup>54</sup> Wunderlich, Zuarbeit zur Lage und Situation bei der Bekämpfung von Schmuggel und Spekulation..., 2 November 1979, BStU, MfS HA IX, 5365, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Czechoslovakia had a similar free-travel agreement with the GDR starting in January 1972. For the impact of the Czechoslovaks on the smuggling, see for example BStU, MfS HA VI, 5251, 88.

citizens coming from Poland leather and fake leather jackets, space heaters as well as gasoline.<sup>56</sup> Another category of goods smuggled into the GDR constituted items deemed by the MfS as potentially subversive. These included audiotape cassettes and symbols of capitalist societies printed on shirts, jackets, and other knickknacks. In 1978 the ZV confiscated two hundred plastic bags ornate with ads of western companies from a man who tried to cross back to the GDR in Görlitz.<sup>57</sup> Such a conflation of industrial products and leisure goods characteristic of an alternative life-style brought from Poland to the GDR is indicative of what was lacking on East German markets. Strict customs regulations of these products, moreover, underscore the fact that for the SED regime customs was not only a means of protecting its national economy, but also its political system.

The GDR customs controls paid equal attention to what products were leaving Germany. Since the extent of the Polish smuggling was a perceived threat to the East German economy, ZV produced very detailed reports of undertaken controls, confiscations, and initiated investigations. From these reports it is easy, therefore, to determine the target products of Polish shoppers: nearly everything. Within a week-long random-sampling controls of Poles leaving the GDR through Frankfurt-Oder checkpoint in late February 1975, customs officers noted some seventy categories of goods. These included foodstuffs, particularly meats and exotic fruits (bananas), alcohol, toys, clothing, shoes, pillows, wallpaper, paint, auto parts, and a whole selection of other items that appeared less frequently.<sup>58</sup> Even more worrisome than the range of

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<sup>56</sup> E.g. Gerhard Stauch, Information über Maßnahmen zur Zurückdrängung und Bekämpfung des Schmuggels und Spekulation..., 8 November 1979, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16963, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Gerhard Stauch, Information über Maßnahmen zur Zurückdrängung und Bekämpfung des Schmuggels und Spekulation..., 19 November 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16964, 14.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Pinkernelle, Information zur Ausfuhr von Gegenständen durch Bürger der VRP aus der DDR, 11 March 1975, BStU, MfS Abt. X, 12/1, 440-444.

products was their volume. Within that week of random sampling, the two hundred people exported one hundred pots, 38kg of meats, 31kg of exotic fruits, 165 pieces of children's clothing, and other goods, all worth ca. ten thousand marks.<sup>59</sup> It is important to emphasize that these were results of controls for a selected group over a short time; to capture the fuller picture of problems in Poland and the frictions arising in cross-border relations, multiply these results by a few hundred thousand tourists who crossed the border over the eight year period.

Not all Polish tourists committed customs offenses, but those who did allow us to reconstruct the interesting demographic structure of the participants in trader tourism. Contrary to popular belief, shopping in the GDR was appealing not only to the inhabitants of the borderlands, but also of central and eastern Poland. The distance these people would have had to cover, nevertheless, influenced the quantity of their purchases for the purposes of hoarding or resale.<sup>60</sup> Citizens of all age groups committed commercial offenses, here including customs infractions, suspicion of speculation, and "property crime" – an euphemism for theft. According to statistics from Neubrandenburg district, nearly half of all "property law" offenders from Poland were under the age of thirty.<sup>61</sup> As the report points out, majority of the offenders were females. Given the traditional gender roles and the availability of ready-to-wear clothing one could put on while fitting, it is not surprising that women were overrepresented among the shoplifters. Most interesting is the occupational differentiation. Of all "property criminals," over 35% were workers, followed by the unemployed (25%), and students (17%). These are groups,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., the one hundred Poles from beyond the borderlands controlled in Frankfurt had with them not only more net value of goods than the hundred citizens from the bordering regions, but also a larger number of any products per person. For more examples see, J. Hoffman, Information..., 24 November 1972, BStU, MfS HA IX, 13554, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Großman and Eder, Einschätzungsbericht über Verfehlungen, die durch Bürger der VR Polen begangen wurden, 8 February 1977, BStU, MfS HA IX 1104, 3-4.



which traditionally had to experiment with self-will to extract from the system what they believed they needed or deserved. Thus, their actions can hardly be explained as an embracement of communist ideology of common ownership and need-based distribution. More likely, a desire to have something not normally available to them – and a fear that the shortages might yet again make these items unavailable – motivated the thefts. Real existing socialism then, did not live up to the original percepts of Marxism.

In fact, the commercial interactions across the Border of Friendship show that the citizens of the PPR and GDR thought in free-market terms, undermining the fragile centrally planned economy. Doubtless, the majority of people shopping on the other side of Oder-Neisse did so to strictly satisfy their immediate needs. The MfS did not even concern itself with travelers exporting small amounts of prohibited items (even if some frustrated customs officers might have confiscated these goods as well).<sup>62</sup> The state organs persecuted more zealously those people, whom the ZV and Stasi suspected of speculation: buying in bulk to resale for profit. This had become a lucrative business for those who did not have a stable occupation, and who had not been deterred, in some cases by six, arrests or other administrative measures.<sup>63</sup> The process would involve bringing in goods from Poland and sale or exchange thereof usually in larger cities like Berlin, Leipzig or Dresden.<sup>64</sup> Then, the obtained East German products would be marketed back in the PPR.

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<sup>62</sup> In a private conversation from late 1979, East German diplomat assured the chair of Polish Customs, Dostojewski, that confiscation of small amounts of goods banned from export, “for example three packs of pepper or 2 pairs of stockings, in principle do not take place” (“erfolgen grundsätzlich nicht”). Heinz Fiedler to Erich Mielke, 29 October 1979, BStU, MfS Abt. X, Nr. 12, 429.

<sup>63</sup> Gerhard Stauch, Information, 9 August 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16964, pg. 66; Zollverwaltung der DDR, Polnische Bestimmungen: Auswahl von Personen die wiederholt Rechtsverletzungen auf dem Territorium der DDR begangen haben... (no date, estimated late 1979, early 1980), BStU, MfS HA VI, 4845/1, 151.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. „Ausgewählte Beispiele zu Feststellungen des Schmuggels und Spekulation, Zeitraum Dezember 1977,“ BStU, MfS HA IX, 3612.

The Poles realized relatively quickly what items were marketable in the GDR. Not only leather goods but also items associated with the West became the source of profit. Only in September 1978, GDR customs confiscated “items of politically discriminatory nature” from 111 East German citizens.<sup>65</sup> These included hoodies with USA symbols (fifteen at once in one case), emblems of the NATO states and armies, pennants of Western soccer clubs, music records, and even “plastic bags with ‘cowboy images.’”<sup>66</sup> The MfS suspected that the merchandise of this sort was largely a product of Polish-based cottage industry.<sup>67</sup> If so, the economy of this black market then was much more extensive as it is usually assumed and involved active production and not merely trade. The question remains, to what extent were such risky businesses of marketing non-socialist symbols consciously partaking in political dissent in addition to subconsciously undermining the economic foundations of the system?

Regardless of the reasons, speculators often worked in groups that consisted of both Polish and East German citizens. The case of Petra G., an East German citizen apprehended by the DVP (in late 1977 or early 1978), exemplifies the opportunism of transnational connections.<sup>68</sup> At least since July 1977, she had been cooperating with a group of Polish citizens, and according to the source, she knew their language well. Once in the hands of the DVP, Petra pretended to be a citizen of the PPR, believing that as a “foreigner” she would receive a lighter penalty. Unfortunately for her, Petra underestimated the abilities of the Stasi. The authorities might have been overwhelmed by their numbers, but at that point already they were quite

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<sup>65</sup> Gerhard Stauch, *Information Monat* September 1978, 9 October 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16964, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Gerhard Stauch, *Information Monat* September 1978, 9 October 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16964, 36, and Gerhard Stauch, *Information*, 9 August 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16964, 66.

<sup>67</sup> Gerhard Stauch, *Entwurf eines Vortrages*, 12 June 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16961, 28.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

experienced in foiling creative stratagems of the speculators like Petra and her gang.

International “business” contacts, however, were very beneficial. The insiders provided better knowledge about the target-market, logistics for transporting and storing goods, as well as the weaknesses of the security apparatus. Additionally, more people involved meant less risk for a single person, because the valuable products were not concentrated in any one’s hands and thus could be smuggled with less suspicion or hidden more easily if confiscation were to occur.

An intrinsic element of cross-border trade was exchange of currencies, which had a very particular dimension under real existing socialism of the 1970s. National currencies of East Germany (mark) and Poland (zloty) were non-convertible on the global market, making any hard-currency (e.g. US dollar or West German mark, DM) hard to obtain and hence highly valuable. Moreover, all Comecon currencies were periodically assigned a stable price that was not subject to rapid market fluctuations. Thus, throughout the decade one GDR mark bought 6.63 zloty when exchanged legally. However, exchange of any currency, and Western ones in particular, was a prerogative of the dictatorships, which granted the permission to do so very reluctantly. As the regimes themselves were in need of hard currency to obtain western technologies, they used any methods possible to extract Western monies either by exports to the non-socialist world or from the citizens who happened to have them. One way was the establishment of state-owned stores such as Intershop in the GDR and Pewex in the PPR, which sold Western goods obtainable only with dollars. With time the Poles became dominant on the currency market, because Poland had liberalized its currency policies, whereas the GDR maintained an inflexible approach.

The passport-free travel between the GDR and the PPR facilitated currency speculation for two reasons. First, it became necessary to have more marks, for example, at one’s disposal to

have a better access to foreign products. Second, the open border offered unprecedented levels of contact to Western currencies flowing in from West Berlin. Therefore, to exchange currency citizens of peoples' democracies developed creative schemes that bordered on the absurd.<sup>69</sup> The cyclical process of exchange used by Polish citizens looked so: Poles exchanged zloty for mark at a lower than official price (1:10) from East Germans shopping in the PPR. The GDR marks would be then smuggled to Berlin and exchanged against USD or DM. The source of these hard currencies were people coming in from West Berlin, mostly visitors to the GDR or foreign diplomats.<sup>70</sup> They benefitted from such a transaction, as they avoided the unrealistic official exchange rate, one mark to one D-mark. A Polish speculator would then return home with the dollars or West German marks to exchange it back for zloty at the official rate of about 1:120,<sup>71</sup> bringing a profit of ca. 20%. This sort of business became even less risky after 1976, as the Polish regime, facing economic crisis and in need of hard currency, stopped asking its citizens for the source of their money.<sup>72</sup> It should not come as a surprise therefore that Poles and East Germans were leading in the statistics for 1978 in number of convictions for smuggling and speculation with 120 and 102 cases respectively, followed in the third place by 17 convictions of citizens of the FRG and West Berlin.<sup>73</sup> Although the extent to which smuggling and speculation hurt the East German economy is hard to assess empirically, the perceived threat it posed to fiscal and social stability was real and thus needed to be combatted.

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<sup>69</sup> See for example, Kochanowski, „Pionierzy“, 116-118.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. Top secret information no. 475/79, 7 August 1979, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 57-61, and Hans-Georg Schneider, Zusammenfassende Einschätzung, 20 March 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16959, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. ZAIG, Hinweise zu den Ergebnissen..., March 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 31-39.

<sup>72</sup> Kochanowski, „Pionierzy“ 116.

<sup>73</sup> Anlage 2 zur Information über Ergebnisse und Erfahrungen der Zollverwaltung der DDR im Kampf gegen Schmuggel und Spekulation, 19 January 1979, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 93-94

## Curbing smuggling and speculation

The extent and pervasiveness of trader tourism, theft, and speculation, raises the following question: how did the regimes in East Berlin and Warsaw reconcile these problems with their insistence on keeping the border open? In other words, what did they do to restore economic order? It appears from the absence of such options noted in any documents, closing the border was not an alternative at that time because of the absence of any discussion to do so noted in the documents and because of the decisions that were undertaken between 1976 and October 1980. Almost certainly someone must have raised the possibility, but not until 1980 did it become acceptable to the SED's Central Committee.<sup>74</sup> Honecker and Mielke were not realpolitikers but ideologists. The open border was Honecker's brainchild and too important of an ideological project, for him or the proud SED to disgracefully back down.<sup>75</sup> Also, the passport free travel quickly became an integral part of the welfare state, of which the regimes could not have disposed too easily. Therefore, the regime at Pankow chose to pursue legal and less direct options, described internally as "policies to roll back smuggling and speculation." The problem lay, however, in only halfhearted cooperation of the Polish regime, arguably undermined the GDR's efforts at improving the situation.

At first, the SED regime took legal steps to curb trader tourism, beginning with stricter identification and customs controls. Already in December 1972, the GDR introduced a restriction on how many marks the Poles could buy, limiting somewhat their purchasing power.<sup>76</sup> In 1974,

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<sup>74</sup> Here I disagree with Czesław Osękowski, who makes an unsubstantiated claim that the idea about closing the border "was maturing for some years already, and when the GDR realized that it cannot hold up to the pressure of Polish tourists, one waited only for a pretext to back down" in Czesław Osękowski, "Stosunki i pogranicze Polski z Niemiecką Republiką Demokratyczną w latach 70." in Kerski, 157.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. speeches by Erich Honecker and Edward Gierek e.g. "Von der Beratung mit unseren polnischen Genossen in Frankfurt," *Neues Deutschland*, 25 June 1972, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Keck-Szajbel, 385.

anyone could exchange and bring across the border the equivalent of (i.e. cash or goods worth) 100 mark at one time.<sup>77</sup> By 1978 the limit was tightened to 100 marks every three months.<sup>78</sup> The currency black market, however, provided an easy way to circumvent those restrictions. Another conventional method for impeding hoarding of East German goods was the expansion of the list of products banned from export. East German authorities banned the export of consumer products and industrial goods, ranging from clothes and foodstuffs to car replacement parts.<sup>79</sup> These measures had a mixed result. They contributed to a significant drop in the number of Polish travelers to the GDR,<sup>80</sup> which in itself was problematic as it stifled social and cultural contacts. While these policies also deterred less courageous smugglers, they were not effective, due to insufficient staffing. According to the head of the analytical group in MfS HA VI (border control and tourism), the rate of luggage control on trains was less than three percent and at checkpoint Pomellen – 1.5 percent for December 1979.<sup>81</sup> These policies, in short, were neither comprehensively nor efficiently enforced.

Due to disappointing results, by late 1979 the regime began to contemplate less conventional methods. By doing so the SED caved in and tolerated some extent validating the existing practice on the ground. The Ministry of Trade and Supply (MHV) analyzed the measures undertaken by the “Centrum” store in Dresden as an example. There improvisation was the key. If foreigners demanded a product that was already in short supply, such products were

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<sup>77</sup> Vereinbarung zwischen dem Minister der Finanzen der DDR und dem Minister der Finanzen der VRP, 22 January 1974, BStU, MfS HA I, 16228, 86-89.

<sup>78</sup> Gerhard Stauch, Entwurf eines Vortrages, 12 June 1978, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16961, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Keck-Szajbel, 385.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Hans-Georg Schneider, Zusammenfassende Einschätzung, 20 March 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16959, 7.

“removed from the display.”<sup>82</sup> On the days when tourist presence was the strongest, considerable amounts of merchandise were relocated from city centers to the suburbs. As the MHV pointed out, however, these methods had many disadvantages. They created shortages in densely populated cities, put a heavy burden on logistics, and did not deter trader tourists who relatively quickly adapted to the new circumstances. MHV expressed more positive opinions towards redirecting the coveted goods from self-service areas of stores to areas that required assistance from sales clerks. The clerks and cashiers could then control the sales more easily and use the opportunity to remind foreign patrons about export regulations.<sup>83</sup>

The ministerial analysts suggested additional options that were rather controversial. Among them was an introduction of variable store hours tailored to the patterns of tourist flow, or relocation of merchandise to internal factory stores, which would ensure an adequate supply for native workers. Another proposal was a policy sell only rationed amounts to foreigners. The document discusses this measure and grapples with questions of what exceptions should be made and how to identify a foreigner. Requesting an identification upon purchase was an option. However, “such policy must apply to all foreigners and all of the GDR territory lest it will be received as limited, unfriendly measure.”<sup>84</sup> Implied in this discussion was an institutional discrimination against Polish shoppers, which would legitimize the already existing discrimination in the stores.<sup>85</sup> Such a step, however, would have only exacerbated social and

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<sup>82</sup> Diskussionsgrundlage zu Maßnahmen für die Lenkung des Verkaufs von Konsumgütern an ausländische Touristen, no date, no author (from the document one can infer late 1979-early 1980, Ministerium für Handel und Versorgung), BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 50.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Osekowski, 152; and various accounts collected in Makaro.

political tensions and probably would not have resolved the shortages. For the consumption-hungry tourists, if there was a will, there was also a way.

The regime in Warsaw, however, lacked the will to cooperate with East Berlin on curbing smugglers and speculators. By analyzing the press and other state publications, Mark Keck-Szajbel has shown that the Gierek administration used the “Border of Friendship [as] a safe – but short-term – solution to hidden inflation and empty shelves” by openly encouraging shopping in the GDR.<sup>86</sup> Polish officials were well aware of the economic disparity between the two countries. They also knew that in this relationship the GDR had the upper hand because all that the PZPR could offer was coal and vacationing spots. In order to avoid possible drastic measures by the GDR, some degree of control over PPR citizens travelling across the border had to be put in place. In March 1975 the PZPR regime tightened the grip on its customs laws, restricting imported goods to one thousand zloty worth per person. As the economic situation worsened, these limits were raised to two thousand starting on January 1, 1978. Clearly, such measures hardly aimed at appeasing the East German side.

The officers of the Polish Customs Bureau (GUC), moreover, were not as diligent, which prompted their East German colleagues to complain about their Polish counterparts to their Department.<sup>87</sup> Corruption, inefficiency, and lax approach to duties on the part of Polish officials contributed to the strengthening of stereotypes of a “Polish economy” (*polnische Wirtschaft*) not only with regard to the society, but also to the authorities of the PPR.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the GUC

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<sup>86</sup> Keck-Szajbel, 381.

<sup>87</sup> For example, “Auswahl von Personen, die wiederholt Rechtsverletzungen auf dem Territorium der DDR begangen haben, obwohl die Zollverwaltung der VRP über die einzelnen Vorkommnisse jeweils informiert wurde.“ No date (est. late 1979), BStU, MfS HA VI, 4845/1, 151.

<sup>88</sup> Tytus Jaskułowski argues that on the level of secret services, the East German chekists did not trust the professionalism of their Polish counterparts, thus underestimating their operational capabilities. Idem, 127.



controllers in addition to accepting bribes from smugglers, engaged in contraband themselves, drank on duty, and expressed negative opinions about the GDR and USSR.<sup>89</sup> East German border guards were also fallible and had their vices, prompting their chief, Heinz Fiedler, to issue occasional memoranda about correct behavior. For example, in 1976 “single instances” of – most likely – corruption forced Fiedler to remind the GDR passport controllers that “the acceptance of gifts and other gratuities (...) is irreconcilable with the work of representatives of state power and chekists.”<sup>90</sup> A higher degree of centralization on the western banks of Oder-Neisse undoubtedly had a stronger effect on discipline, efficiency, and communication.

Communicative chaos and plurality of interpretations characterized what would prove to be the last effort of the Polish authorities to regain control over the cross-border traffic. In May 1980 state level discussions over the introduction of minimum obligatory exchange for Polish-East German tourists took place.<sup>91</sup> Although the Communists in Pankow were rather pleased with the idea, they were disagreeing with Polish demands of reciprocating the policy and requiring the GDR citizens travelling east to also have a minimum amount of currency exchanged.<sup>92</sup> An absurd situation occurred because the authorities in Poland did not know how to interpret the new regulations themselves.

From the following reports one can infer that the German side was ultimately not notified about the details and the ZV had to gather the information by observing the new policy being put into practice. On June 3, 1980, East German controller at the checkpoint in Pomellen reported a

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. Jaskułowski, 336.

<sup>90</sup> Heinz Fiedler to Leiter der Passkontrolleinheiten, 12 November 1976, BStU, MfS HA VI, 7760, 83.

<sup>91</sup> The idea was that all citizens of the PPR travelling west, upon crossing the border must show a proof of having exchanged 25 marks (East Germans had to exchange 200 zloty). The GDR had already in place the policy of minimum obligatory exchange for visitors from capitalist countries.

<sup>92</sup> Willi Stoph, Beschluß des Ministerrates 166/I.21/80, 22 Mai 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI 4845/2, 238.

conversation with his Polish colleague, from which he learned that the Poles were given instructions to turn back all Polish citizens who had no evidence of the minimum exchange in their currency booklets. “This instruction was interpreted differently by the Polish controllers. [The interlocutor] said verbatim: ‘One minister says one thing, another something else and contradicts it. And when I send the citizens back, they go complain and I’m the one getting in trouble.’”<sup>93</sup> Similar disorder took place in Szczecin, where the bank cashiers were unsure whether one was allowed to exchange only 25 marks or more. Some two weeks later, there were still inconsistencies, but the GUC officers only “instructed” the East German visitors about the policy, letting them pass.<sup>94</sup> By doing so, they demonstrated a level of flexibility, independence, and their use of *Eigen-Sinn* towards the tourists who did not have a proof of the minimum exchange.

The episode from June 1980 is illustrative of not only the differences in the functioning of Polish and East German power apparatus and their mutual relations but also of the attitudes – both popular and governmental – towards the project of the Border of Friendship. The introduction of the minimum exchange was a radical step on the part of the PZPR regime. It demonstrated a commitment to keeping the border open by addressing the issue, to which the GDR had been pointing out for the past eight years. According to some Polish and East German citizens that policy was an obstacle to those who crossed the border for reasons other than consumerism.<sup>95</sup> However, the new regulation produced only a short-term drop in cross-border

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<sup>93</sup> Brumshagen, Fernschreiben, 3 June, 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Stauch, Information zur Arbeitsweise der polnischen Zollorganen, 16 June, 1980, BStU, MfS HA VI, 16960, 10. Additional reports pertaining to that situation, same file, pp. 16-17, 20-22.

<sup>95</sup> Citizens of both the PPR and GDR are reported to complain that social contacts will suffer as a result: “Friendships can only be kept by the way of post” and “traveling to friends and relatives requires no currency.” From Stauch, 5 June 1980, and 9 June 1980, BStU MfS HA VI, 16960, 20-22 and 16-17 respectively.

travel, attributable most certainly to the confusion that the policy initially caused (See Appendix 2). The same holds true for its effects on smuggling. The ineffectiveness of Polish authorities undoubtedly reinforced the Stasi's negative perception of the PPR's ability to exert control – a characteristic of high importance with regard to the stability of socialism in Eastern Europe.

### **Social Contacts**

If the excessive trader tourism destabilized East German economy, social contacts across the Border of Friendship threatened ideological stability and thus the very existence of the first socialist German state. This claim may seem extravagant, for one of the aims of the passport-free travel project was to facilitate transnational relations. Which of these contacts cultivated “progressive” socialist internationalism and which promoted of subversive, “hostile-negative” nature, was a hard question for the security apparatus. Still, they preferred to err on the side of suspicion. The relatively higher degree of cultural and ideological liberalization in Poland, stereotyped as the “happiest barrack in the Soviet camp,” influenced the outlook or worldview formation of many GDR citizens.<sup>96</sup> Especially young East Germans wanted to “escape the petit-bourgeoisie narrow-mindedness” of the GDR society.<sup>97</sup> The open border facilitated bonds between like-minded Poles and Germans. In the aftermath of the 1976 protests, organized opposition in the PPR reached an unprecedented scale, increasing the pressure on the Stasi to search for any signs of ideological deviation being imported to the GDR. What limited their ability to control the cross-border traffic was only halfhearted cooperation of the Polish security apparatus (SB).<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Zariczny, 11.

<sup>97</sup> Mehlhorn, 37.

<sup>98</sup> For a detailed analysis of the cooperation between the secret services of the GDR and PPR in the late 1970s and 80s see Jaskułowski.

The ramifications civic contacts across the Border of Friendship had for the relations between the GDR and the PPR are quite complex and require a multifaceted analysis. On the social level, negative stereotypes rooted in cultural and historical traditions of earlier centuries reinforced themselves. Due to the relentless purchases by the Poles, the East Germans did not succumb to the official propaganda of friendship and in its stead perceived their eastern neighbors as thieves, alcoholics, and greedy, lazy, cunning blackmarketeers.<sup>99</sup> Such negative stereotypes appeared throughout the country but were particularly prevalent among the inhabitants of the eastern borderlands, who absorbed most of the effects of trader tourism, such as shortages, and thus began to call for closing of the border.<sup>100</sup> In the initial years of the open border project, the state authorities even intervened in cases of slander. A saleswoman in a shoe store in Saßnitz (near Rostock), for instance, was reported to the MfS after she remarked to her colleague: “Look, here come the Polacks, the thieves. Stand over there and pay attention that they don’t steal anything.”<sup>101</sup> As long as there was hope for improvement in cross-border travel, the East German regime worked to suppress such attitudes. However, the hopes dissipated in the second half of the decade and the SED regime itself began voicing negative stereotypes of “Polish economy” stifled in its progress due to constant popular protests.<sup>102</sup> Thus, many citizens

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<sup>99</sup> Mehlhorn, 40-41; Makaro, 76-112.

<sup>100</sup> Elżbieta Opiłowska, “Stosunki między Polską a NRD w pamięci mieszkańców pogranicza” in Kerski, 170. Also, Ruchniewicz, “Grenzen,” in Hermann, 27.

<sup>101</sup> Hoffman, Information über Feststellungen zum pass- und visafreien Reiseverkehr, 24 November 1972, BStU, MfS HA IX, 13554, 10.

<sup>102</sup> For East German anti-Polish propaganda in the late 1970s and early 80s as reflected in the state press and official discourse, cf. Zariczny, 53, and Keck-Szajbel, 387. The term *polnische Wirtschaft* (Polish economy) is a stereotypical reflection of Polish social organization present in German language since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is usually associated with a lack of order, planning, and disorder. See Hubert Orłowski, *Polnische Wirtschaft: Zum deutschen Polendiskurs der Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1996).

of the PPR must have wondered, what had happened to either the socialist friendship or the solidarity among “oppressed” peoples.

Many Poles also expressed a negative attitude towards their “red Prussian” neighbors, which resulted mostly from a lack of understanding of the East German fears and historically rooted prejudices. Masses of tourists from the GDR visiting Polish cities or vacationing at the Baltic shore left an imprint on the locals’ perception as predominantly loud, rude, and demonstratively superior to the hosts. The SB reported in October 1972 multiple cases of East German citizens “throwing candy and chewing-gum in order to take photos of [Polish] children collecting that candy off the ground.”<sup>103</sup> While such behavior demonstrated the apparent economic superiority of the GDR, it predictably offended Polish sensibilities. More worrisome from the point of view of Polish state security and individual citizens were the visits by the expelled Germans. The open border offered an opportunity for those who had lived east of the Oder-Neisse line before 1945 to see their former properties thereby instill anxiety in the current – but still insecure – owners. Some of these visitors allegedly made remarks about the “impermanence of the Oder-Neisse border and their future return” to their former properties.<sup>104</sup> These fraught exchanges, coupled with the investigative measures employed by the East German customs controllers, brought about a rearticulation of World War II rhetoric. Hence, when some, perhaps drunken, Poles greeted East German tourists with cries of “Heil Hitler” and smugglers apprehended by the authorities vulgarized the ZV controllers as “fascists” and “Gestapo,”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Henryk Fennig, Informacja dot. skutków otwarcia granicy między Polską a NRD, 20 October 1972, IPN, BU 0365/102/1, 212.

<sup>104</sup> S. Morawski, Notatka dot. skutków bezpaszportowego ruchu turystycznego pomiędzy PRL i NRD, 3 March 1972, IPN, BU 0365/102/1, 32.

<sup>105</sup> For example see Kebbadies, Sachstandsbericht, 7 December 1979, BStU, MfS Abt. X, 12/1, 87-94.

many GDR citizens wondered why. Since 1949, the system kept telling them that they were the “good” Germans, and the former fascists lived in the West.

It would be a gross misrepresentation of the social consequences of the open border to only speak of growing antipathy between East Germans and Poles. Unrestricted travel permitted larger numbers of people to be in contact with their neighbors, some of whom developed closer friendships. One opportunity for establishing contact between Poles and the East Germans existed through the official youth exchanges.<sup>106</sup> *Neues Deutschland* reported in July 1975 about “youth camps for work and relaxation” in which some three hundred high school students from the GDR and the PPR worked together at a construction site in Frankfurt/Oder for three weeks.<sup>107</sup> One-hundred-fifty young East Germans attended similar camps combining work and leisure in Gorzów and Zielona Góra. These programs undoubtedly left an impression on the young citizens, who approached the German-Polish past and present without the historic baggage of the adults. But due to social stagnation and immobility, the younger generation also saw the future in darker colors.<sup>108</sup> In the end, it was their cohort that would propose alternatives to the existing system in the late 1970s and 80s.

Inasmuch as the state propaganda promoted the idea that the Border of Friendship was serving its official purpose, the security services of the GDR and PPR paid close attention to the quality of contacts between the citizens. For example, the Festival of Polish and East German Youths “Frankfurt 77,” which took place on May 28-30, 1977 in Frankfurt/Oder offered the MfS and SB an opportunity to work together and test their abilities to prevent any objectionable

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<sup>106</sup> E.g. “Wycieczki szkolne do NRD,” *Trybuna Ludu*, 15 February, 1972, 4.

<sup>107</sup> “Jugendlager mit Gästen aus der Volksrepublik Polen,” *Neues Deutschland*, 8 July, 1975, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Ralph Jessen, “Mobility and Blockage during the 1970s” in Jarausch, 355.

political action from spoiling an ideologically sponsored manifestation of friendship. In a report to the Ministry of Interior (MSW), the Polish delegation proclaimed that the event had been successful due to a timely detection of political provocateurs and “elimination of undesirable elements.”<sup>109</sup> These provocations included not only two young men under the influence of alcohol, who attempted to interrupt the speeches by Honecker and Gierek, but also a woman recounting the Nazi atrocities, and “a group of German hippies” concealed in a den.<sup>110</sup> The quoted report illustrates vividly the preoccupation with socialist political correctness: at least for the MSW, the success of the Festival was derived from a lack of open contestation of the system at a time when the opposition in Poland began organizing itself into a civil society.

“Frankfurt 77” was touted as a successful cooperation between the Stasi and the SB. Officers of the East German and Polish secret security worked together on the ground identifying potential threats, observing persons of interest, and acting to prevent any scandals. In light of Jaskułowski’s analysis of the secret service cooperation, the degree of satisfaction with the outcome in Frankfurt should not surprise us. As long as the language barrier between German and Polish officials was overcome, the chekists from the PPR and GDR worked together quite well on purely procedural matters.<sup>111</sup> Problems appeared more often among the higher levels of command, who were much more concerned with the larger implications of methods, political attitudes, and perceived quality of the other security apparatus. The report from “Frankfurt 77” speaks to this inequality between the MSW and MfS. The estimated attendance at the festival was twenty-three thousand. The Polish SB delegated 46 operative officers to Frankfurt and

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<sup>109</sup> S. Kabaciński, *Sprawozdanie z operacyjnego zabezpieczenia manifestacji młodzieży Polski i NRD – Frankfurt ‘77*, 3 June 1977, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 133.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>111</sup> Jaskułowski, see especially pg. 85.

enlisted additional five for the headquarters at home. The East German security service, Lt. Colonel Kabaciński wrote in his report, “approached the safety at the festival with tremendous organizational pomp, engaging for this work some 20,000 staff from the whole territory of the GDR.”<sup>112</sup> In contrast to the SB, the Stasi could approach even such a seemingly uneventful festival with the utmost seriousness, because the MfS had the people, money, and a strong ideological backbone.<sup>113</sup>

Social contacts between Poles and East Germans developed positively whenever both parties had a common interest. On the one hand, some friendships, genuine in the sense that they were built on mutual attraction and shared values, survived even the period of closed border in the 1980s.<sup>114</sup> These included for example the former mayors of Guben and Gubin.<sup>115</sup> In a number of cases the initial contacts even led to romantic relationships between Poles and East Germans. Some scholars measure the success of the civic rapprochement by investigating the transnational marriages contracted between 1972 and 1980.<sup>116</sup> In her sociological study, Julita Makaro found that in the bordering towns Guben/Gubin alone, 64 unions between Poles and East Germans were forged from 1972 to 1979.<sup>117</sup> Out of all these couples, only one settled in the Polish Gubin. The decision about where to reside, as she convincingly explains, was based on economic factors as well as cultural ones. Brides (the majority of whom were Poles) were expected to join their husbands’ households. On a national scale, scholars counted around ten thousand of Polish-East

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<sup>112</sup> Kabaciński, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 134.

<sup>113</sup> Gieseke, 71-73.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Tomala, 513, and Opłowska, 168-170.

<sup>115</sup> Makaro, 107.

<sup>116</sup> E.g. Tomala, 512-513, and Osękowski, 151.

<sup>117</sup> Makaro, 105.



German marriages, which may not be a significant number in absolute terms, but certainly is impressive given the history of the two nations and the rather short existence of the open border.

The common interests that brought East Germans and Poles together also included their dissatisfaction with or outright opposition to the socialist system, in which they lived. Such was the case of Waclaw S. and Erdmunte H. The MfS became interested in Waclaw in the fall of 1977 in connection with an investigation of conscientious objectors from the GDR and the FRG.<sup>118</sup> A group of six young men and women from West Germany and another six from East Germany travelled to Poland in the summer of 1977 to join a commune in Warsaw. Relying on its own sources, the Stasi determined that the organizer of the commune was Waclaw, who “sees himself as a dissident and has connections to the Workers’ Defense Committee [KOR].” Erdmunte, daughter of an East German pastor, married Waclaw in the summer of 1977 and allegedly provided a link between the Polish and East German anti-conscription groups.<sup>119</sup> The larger circle of acquaintances included members of the Reconciliation Action (*Aktion Sühnezeichen*)<sup>120</sup> and other individuals from the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and the Federal Republic.

It was therefore this interaction of society and politics that both posed a threat to the regimes in East Berlin and Warsaw as well as reshaped the states’ perception of the open border’s functioning. The people’s “self-will” to organize unpolitical lives in a thoroughly ruled state exhibited itself through the smuggling and other economic crimes, which had been a

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<sup>118</sup> Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, Information: Kontakte von Wehrdienstverweigerern aus der DDR und Kriegsdienstgegnern aus der BRD in der VRP, 25 October 1977, IPN, BU 0296/194, 7-10.

<sup>119</sup> M. Kruk to Wydział IV Departament III MSW, 18 January 1978, IPN, BU 0296/194, 16.

<sup>120</sup> Aktion Sühnezeichen was a peace organization of the German Evangelical Church founded in the 1950s, whose East German group maintained contacts with Polish intellectuals and concerned itself with the developments in the PPR, for example through the Anna Morawska Seminars on Poland headed by Ludwig Mehlhorn.

concern for the GDR since 1972. However, the rise of subversive, anti-political spheres that coincided with the aftermath of the Helsinki Accords, increasingly preoccupied the MfS in the second half of the decade. Moreover, as Poland's economy deteriorated further, worker strikes erupted in June 1976 in Radom, Ursus and elsewhere across the country. The immediate result of these protests was the growth of Polish oppositional activity, centered mostly around the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) founded in September 1976.<sup>121</sup> The regime quickly released the arrested protesters and members of the KOR, suggesting that under Gierek a civil society had a space to develop. Clearly, this civil society was not limited to Polish nationals, as the case of Waclaw, Erdmunte, and the conscientious objectors exemplified, demonstrating the growing ideological rift between the state and society in the PPR and GDR.

### **Friendship as political subversion**

While the average Pole viewed the GDR as the West, with its proximity to western Europe and a higher standard of living, the average East German saw the West was in Poland.<sup>122</sup> In the opinion of some GDR citizens, "Poland seemed closer to the West – men could wear long hair, girls shorter skirts."<sup>123</sup> There one could get hold of western magazines and music, and be more open in forms of expression. This made Polish real existing socialism "more colorful" than its GDR counterpart,<sup>124</sup> although one should not forget that in absolute terms, the SB was a brutal force at the disposal of a dictatorial regime. The East Germans very quickly realized that also more dissent was tolerated in the liberal Poland than was at home. Just weeks after the opening

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<sup>121</sup> For information about KOR and the rise of Polish opposition movement in English, see Jan Lipski, *KOR: a History of the Workers' Defense Committee in Poland, 1976-1981* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Opilowska, 168.

<sup>123</sup> Opilowska, 167.

<sup>124</sup> Olschowsky, 53; Ruchniewicz, "Grenzen," 27.

of the border in 1972 citizens of the GDR began to use Polish postal service to send correspondence to the Federal Republic and other capitalist countries, relying on the belief (and fact) that mail in Poland had not been opened to the same extent as it was in the GDR.<sup>125</sup>

Only after 1975 did the East German leadership realize that unrestricted travel to Poland carried a potential for subversive action and thus a negative influence on its citizens. The tone of an informer's report from the 1975 International Song Festival in Sopot reveals a high degree of surprise with the reality of Polish socio-political liberalization. The informer observed that in a reading lounge one could not find any magazines from the GDR. Instead, there was a muckraking newspaper from Austria and five different publications from West Germany.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, East German citizens socialized with West Germans and the performance of the only political song at the Festival, by the GDR's Die Puhdys, was interrupted by a young man. Unrestricted travel, therefore, opened the possibility for millions of East German tourists to witness the still comparatively high level of freedom in Poland and escape from the eyes and ears of the Stasi. The authorities, nevertheless, had no desire to lose control and thus sent trusted informers to the PPR as well. The informer's report, naturally, did not directly affect the East German regime's policy, but their impressions shaped its long-term perception of Poland and the PZPR's ideological commitment.

Poland of the late 1970s experienced a growth of more conscious society, which "ignored the regime and did not discuss with it, but instead began to build its own, grassroots structures."<sup>127</sup> Like-minded East German citizens began to tap into those networks as well,

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<sup>125</sup> Morawski, Notatka..., 3 March 1972, IPN, BU 0365/102/1, 32.

<sup>126</sup> Auszug aus einer Information des VFS Groß-Berlin, 24 September 1975, BStU, MfS Abt. X, 660, 130.

<sup>127</sup> Zariczny, 19.

seeing Poland, according to Erhart Neubert's argument, as a "mobilizing factor" for the dissidents in the GDR.<sup>128</sup> The Stasi investigated any suspicious connections and reported them to its counterparts in Warsaw, with the hope that the SB would at least help prevent the meetings between the dissident groups from the GDR and PPR.<sup>129</sup> The MfS possessed wide knowledge of the contacts between the groups like KOR, Club of Catholic Intelligentsia (KIK) and East German dissidents such as Ludwig Mehlhorn.<sup>130</sup> In lengthy reports sent to Warsaw, the Stasi provided detailed lists of contacts people that Mehlhorn and others had as well as plans for shipping a duplicator and paint to Poland to produce samizdat, for example.<sup>131</sup> What clearly displeased the East German partners, however, was the extent to which Warsaw acted on this information to restore social and ideological order in the PPR and prevent its spread to the west.<sup>132</sup> Aware of its geographic position as the transit country between dissident sympathizers in West Berlin/FRG and the hotbed of opposition in Poland, the Stasi saw itself as the sole fighter on the front to defend socialism both in the GDR and in the PPR.

Aware of the potential consequences for ideological well-being of the population, the Stasi vehemently pursued anyone who was unfortunate enough to possess publications deemed illegal in the GDR. After the protests in Gdańsk in August 1980 and the creation of "Solidarity" trade union, the Stasi's paranoia reached absurd levels. GDR border guards confiscated from

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<sup>128</sup> Neubert.

<sup>129</sup> Ciastoń, Sprawozdanie z rozmów z przedstawicielami MBP NRD w dniach 12-14 czerwca 1978, 28 July 1978, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 207.

<sup>130</sup> E.g. Wytwor, Informacja z korespondencji MBP NRD to MSW PRL, 15 December 1977, IPN, BU 0296/194, 17; MfS to MSW, 29 August 1978, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 215; Mielke to Kowalczyk, 28 January 1977, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 74; Information, 16 August 1977; IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 139-142.

<sup>131</sup> Information, 16 August 1977; IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 140.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Jaskułowski, 272.

Polish citizens travelling in transit from West Berlin or the FRG not only the West German *Spiegel*, *Stern* and pornography, but also less political gardening catalogs, automobile magazines, pictures of Pope John Paul II, and – from a renowned Polish sports commentator – sports magazines.<sup>133</sup> Naturally, samizdat publications and forbidden books often originated in West Berlin’s publishing houses, like the Mütz Verlag, and then traversed the GDR to reach Poland.<sup>134</sup> The insistence on foiling any attempts to smuggle illegal literature can be explained by the Stasi’s justified fears that a good portion of these works might find eager readers in East Germany.

Another explanation for the East German zeal at fighting subversive materials and consumer goods was a real concern for the PPR, whose secret police appeared to the Stasi leadership as “revisionist” and incompetent – or unwilling to – effectively crush the opposition. Jaskułowski shows that in fact the Polish SB had more experience in its struggle with the political opposition. Contrary to the Stasi, the SB’s main goal was not to eliminate the dissidents, but by using repression and operative tactics to weaken dissent or manipulate it for its own purposes.<sup>135</sup> Erich Mielke, however, preferred to remain loyal to the ideology and his deeply engrained old-school chekist tactics. The differences in operational approaches between the leadership of the MfS and MSW inhibited cooperation between the forces of seemingly friendly countries. Moreover, Mielke was often obnoxious and paternalistic towards fellow chekists from Poland, instructing them in Marxism-Leninism, which at that time did not have much appeal

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<sup>133</sup> For example see the reports sent by the MfS to MSW in IPN, BU 1596/898. Due to privacy clause my providing any more detail would make the person publically identifiable. *Gesetz über die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, §32-34.

<sup>134</sup> E.g. Ciastoń, *Sprawozdanie z rozmów z przedstawicielami MBP NRD*, 28 July 1978, IPN, BU 0296/194/5, 207.

<sup>135</sup> Jaskułowski, 260.

even among the communists in the MSW.<sup>136</sup> Thus, on the security-political level as well, the stereotype of “Polish economy” characterized the SED’s perception of its Eastern neighbor. The PPR lacked order; it allowed the KOR to develop and the strikes of August 1980 to culminate in the creation of independent trade unions, officially registered in early October.<sup>137</sup> To the secret services of the GDR, as Jaskułowski shows, Poland became a hostile country by the fall of 1980.<sup>138</sup> How could the GDR allow free travel across an open border under such circumstances?

### **Closing the border**

The reasons for closing the border in 1980 remain a disputed aspect of historical debate. The strictly political interpretation presupposes that the civic unrest in Poland and the legalization of the first independent trade union “Solidarity” triggered a fear of oppositional behavior spilling over to the GDR.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, the economic explanation sees the rise of Solidarity as merely a pretext for East Germans to reimpose travel regulations.<sup>140</sup> As one of the proponents of the latter view, Mark Keck-Szajbel offers a significant contribution to this debate through his analysis of the cultural and economic aspects of the policy change, but fails to draw on sources that would speak to the political-ideological justifications. Therefore, I want to provide an alternative explanation that interrelates politics and economy. The problems of trader tourism certainly lay at the base of the decision to close the border, because they affected the economy and – most importantly – the mood in the GDR. Nevertheless, drawing on the

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<sup>136</sup> For example see minutes from the meeting between delegation of the MfS and Mieleke with the leadership of the MSW in Warsaw on June 14, 1978; as well as the comments by Jan Wójcik, *Zapis służbowy*, 25 July 1978, IPN BU 0296/194/5 pg. 171-178. See also Jaskułowski, 124-160.

<sup>137</sup> E.g, Hermann, 46.

<sup>138</sup> Jaskułowski, 361.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Tomala, 518; Basil Kerski, “Stosunki między NRD a Polską. Próba bilansu,” in Kerski, 21; and Makaro, 111.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Osękowski, 157; and Keck-Szajbel, 385.

transcripts of conversations between Polish and East German leadership as well as internal Stasi communiques and unofficial informers' (IM) reports, I conclude that the fear of counterrevolution was the main reason behind closing the border. However, an economic explanation played well into the hands of the SED-regime because the population, directly affected by shortages, could better understand the motives why their right to travel to Poland was no longer a part of the welfare package.

The Polish crisis of August/September of 1980 was not an isolated, domestic development, but an internationally publicized phenomenon that reached the GDR mostly via West German media.<sup>141</sup> Much to the dismay of the East German regime, the people there were well aware of the events in Poland. Support for the “Solidarity” trade unions was not necessarily widespread, but existed and manifested itself in multiple ways. For example, “Solidarity” emblems appeared on walls, flyers were distributed among workers, one man donated 200 marks to the Union’s fund in Gdańsk Shipyards, and dissidents like Roland Jahn rode bicycles adorned with Polish flags with a slogan “Solidarity with the Polish nation” affixed to them.<sup>142</sup> The East German security apparatus persecuted such expressions of solidarity vehemently and feared their further spread. Joachim Herrmann, a member of the SED Politburo responsible for propaganda and agitation, informed his Soviet counterpart and secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Mikhail Zimianin, that “anti-socialist elements from the PPR attempted to propagate nationalist, anticommunist, and anti-Soviet slogans on the territory of the GDR. We [the SED] had to put a stop to it.”<sup>143</sup> Even Honecker demonstrated considerable concern about the

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<sup>141</sup> For the Strikes of August 1980 and the origins of the Solidarity see for example, Garton Ash.

<sup>142</sup> Zariczny, 21-23.

<sup>143</sup> Joachim Herrmann, Anhang 1 zur Vorlage für das Politbüro, Arbeitsprotokoll Nr. 45/80, 4 November 1980, SAPMO-BArch ZPA, J IV 2/2/A-2361 published in *Hart und kompromißlos durchgreifen: Geheimakten der SED-*

international support for the Polish counterrevolution. Complaining about western television “broadcasting this all in a concentrated form to the GDR,” he compared the media reports to war correspondence in which “rowdies are celebrated as heroes.”<sup>144</sup>

The strikes in Poland caused a political crisis not only domestically, but also between Warsaw and Berlin. The removal of Edward Gierek from power in early September 1980 brought Stanisław Kania to the position of the First Secretary of the PZPR. This move gave hopes to the SED, which, both for ideological and economic reasons, was concerned with the ability of the Polish state to deal effectively with the strikes. Because of the stoppage of work in major Polish industries, the GDR did not receive the promised amounts of coal so essential to the East German industry and energy in the aftermath of the oil price shocks.<sup>145</sup> In a letter to Kania, dated September 30, Honecker expressed concern that the GDR had not received any coal shipments since September 17.<sup>146</sup> It was, therefore, in Berlin’s vital interest to stabilize the situation in Poland. It appears that between then and late October both sides tried their best to come up with a solution that would address the problem of calming the bilateral situation. The party-state talks, however, failed to provide for stabilization.<sup>147</sup>

On October 24, Honecker informed Kania in a telephone conversation that due to the lack of a unified solution the GDR would suspend passport-free travel.<sup>148</sup> Honecker explained the

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*Führung über die Unterdrückung der polnischen Demokratiebewegung*, Michael Kubina, Manfred Wilke, eds. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), 97.

<sup>144</sup> 13.9.1980, SAPMO-BArch ZPA, J IV 2/2/A-2349 in Kubina and Wilke, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Hermann in Hermann, 43, 54-59.

<sup>146</sup> SAPMO-BArch ZPA, J IV 2/2-1859 in Kubina and Wilke, 73

<sup>147</sup> SAPMO-BArch ZPA, J IV 2/2/A-2358 in Kubina and Wilke, 92.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.



motive behind this step by dwelling on the economic problems and the potential negative impact the events in Poland might have on the East German society. Although Kania expressed understanding for Berlin's decision, it appears that he tried to dissuade the GDR from closing the border, as this would further damage the reputation and image of East Germany internationally and domestically. The leader of the PZPR recalled that it was Honecker's idea to relax travel regulations and that "it would not be right when Comrade Honecker would be now associated with the suspension" of that agreement. Nevertheless, the fate of the open border was sealed and any further diplomatic negotiation was out of the question. Interestingly enough, Honecker assured Kania that the closing would be a temporary measure "until a time when we could repeal these limits again." It is hard to judge to what extent the regime in Berlin actually believed in the possible reopening of the border. However, the suggestion that the new policy was only temporary indicates that the SED Politburo hoped for an improvement in Poland.

The process of closing the border involved primarily the Ministry for State Security, which oversaw the border controls, customs, as well as foreign and domestic intelligence. On October 28 Erich Mielke issued a confidential communique No. 66/80, about the "temporary changes to the procedures in passport and visa free travel."<sup>149</sup> The new measures would take effect on October 30 due to "the situation that arose in Poland and its impact on the GDR" in order to "protect the interests of the citizens of the GDR." In this document, Mielke explained the "situation" and the "interests." First, he addressed the issue of economy, which continued to deteriorate in the PPR. The purchasing of East German goods had a negative impact on the mood among the citizens of the GDR. Then, Mielke turned to the question of "counterrevolution." He emphasized the abuse of the free travel agreement for the purposes of spreading subversive

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<sup>149</sup> Erich Mielke, Vertraurliche Verschlusssache, MfS 008 Nr. 66/80, 28 October 1980, BStU, MfS HA XXII, 5647/1, 216-227.

propaganda into the GDR. Only with regard to this topic, did the chief of the MfS directly state that “it comes down to helping Polish communists by recognizing and stopping” any attempts at meddling by “hostile forces from abroad.” The “abroad” here certainly refers to supporters of the Solidarity movement from the capitalist West, who would transit across the GDR to reach Poland. Nevertheless, the PPR was also “abroad,” but none of the nominally allied socialist countries could have been depicted officially as a threat. Thus, in order not to undermine the official party line, also official explanations had to mask the reality.

It is clear that the SED felt threatened by the oppositional momentum developing on the other side of Oder and Neisse and lost trust in the PZPR. Two things speak for this claim. First, it is the speed with which the GDR implemented the closing of the border. As we saw earlier, both sides still attempted negotiation until mid-October. However, on October 8, the Polish Sejm passed an ordinance allowing for independent trade unions, and the court registered first twelve of such organizations on October 20.<sup>150</sup> Around the 24<sup>th</sup>, the SED decided unilaterally to reintroduce stricter controls and an official invitation requirement for travelers, which was put in effect only a week later. Second, the Stasi issued new regulations for sending unofficial informers to Poland on October 29.<sup>151</sup> The head of the department would from now on have to personally approve any IM going to the PPR, and such approval would be based on “high sense of political responsibility” of a given individual. This regulation reflected clearly the fear of subversion, if even the “shield and sword of the Party” was concerned with political reliability and loyalty of its collaborators.

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<sup>150</sup> Hermann, in Hermann, 46.

<sup>151</sup> Maßnahmeplan zur Realisierung der Aufgabenstellung des Genossen Minister ausgehend von der GVS MfS 008 N 18/80, 29 October 1980, BStU, MfS HA XXII, 5225/1, 4.

Question of loyalty and popular attitudes towards the new travel restrictions interested the security apparatus in the weeks that followed the closing of the border. It appears that Stasi instructed the IMs to collect information about public opinion on the topic of restricted travel. The reports should have reassured the GDR leadership. Even though some people expressed negative opinions, that the travel restriction was “an intrusion into personal lives,”<sup>152</sup> the majority of these informations point out to a widespread welcoming of the new policy. The recurring theme in these reports is the satisfaction that the Poles would not “regularly buy up” everything and the hope that “supply situation would improve.”<sup>153</sup> The SED propaganda department could have then congratulated itself on a very successful maneuver. By capitalizing on the popular discontent among its citizens, and then presenting the reintroduction of restricted travel as a way to curb trader tourism, the GDR leadership not only averted negative attitudes toward the measures, but also gained on popularity among those who felt in competition with Polish customers.

Undeniably, the reasons for closing the border had roots in the intrinsic problems of command economy which could not adjust fast enough to increased demand. But the push to actually revisit the agreement from 1971 came from the threat of a “counterrevolution.” It is important to keep in mind, then, that the GDR regime had battled smuggling and speculation for all of the eight years of the open border’s existence. Only at the time of an unprecedented upheaval in Poland did the SED Politburo decide to unilaterally limit travel once again. Moreover, the explanation that the East German economy and citizens suffered at the hands of Polish shoppers was a convenient excuse, which appealed to the widely-held popular feeling. On

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<sup>152</sup> Lübeck, Quelle IMK „Uwe,“ 26 November 1980, BStU, Abt. XXII/3, 20-21.

<sup>153</sup> Bethig, Quelle IMB “Roland,” 18 November 1980, BStU, MfS Abt. XXII/3, 24. See also similar reports in the same file, pp. 12-14.

the other hand, admitting that the GDR felt threatened by the “bacillus” of dissidence would automatically undermine the position and image of the SED regime, presenting it as insecure and distrustful towards its own citizenry. Since from the perspective of the East German dictatorship, the relations between state and society were fragile, the SED had to keep the situation at home stable by carefully caring for the welfare of its citizens.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggests that it was precisely the main purpose of the open-border project, improvement of social contacts, that backfired and brought about its demise. The change in the nature of “friendships” made across the border, from socialist or neutral to economically and politically subversive, threatened the stability of the system across the Eastern Bloc. The economic burden imposed on the East German economy by the Poles was present throughout the decade, but the significant influence of organized opposition appeared only after 1976 as the political situation in Poland became more volatile. Certainly, not much could have been done to fully eradicate smuggling and speculation, but ever-tighter economic regulations could have limited that phenomenon. On the other hand, only the closing of the border and reinstitution of exit and entry controls could limit the number of undesirable social contacts. This is indeed what took place in October 1980, because the SED leadership did not know how to justify an open border with a political outlier like Poland. This indicates how the particular nature of relations between the state and society in Poland ambivalently affected the social relations between the Poles and East Germans, which in turn had a negative impact on the political relationship of the GDR and PPR.

Therefore, the underlying factor for the turnabout in the functioning of the border was the political and economic inequality between these two Eastern Bloc states. It seems that the open

border did not offer enough reciprocal benefits. Whereas consumer goods became the export product of the GDR, the PPR specialized in exporting political subversion. Such an exchange clearly displeased the East German authorities. Because the state of the economy in Poland, as compared to the GDR, was much lower, Polish citizens attempted to raise their standard of living at the expense of East Germany. The inadequacy of planned economy, however, could not cope with the increased demand, thus leading to social and political tensions across the border. Moreover, because the standard of living in the PPR was relatively lower, the PZPR regime could not legitimize its rule as a welfare provider to the same extent that the SED could. Hence, Warsaw relied on increasing liberalization to assure compliance, creating in such a way an ideological difference between the Polish and East German societies. In this sense, not all Socialist Bloc regimes were welfare dictatorships.

The regimes certainly rejoiced in the fact that they provided their citizens with an opportunity to travel and make contacts, but without the ability to fully control the independent undertakings of the people, they could not control the outcomes either. Not only the cooperation between Polish-East German intellectual dissidents, but also the gangs of speculators and thieves proved that the original purpose of the Border of Friendship had transformed itself into something negative. While the dissidents consciously worked to undermine the real existing socialist dictatorships by strengthening trans-national ties, the economic criminals both subverted the command economy and caused a reappearance of divisive national stereotypes. Regrettably, neither side had a real chance to correct these stereotypes until the 1990s.

The open-border project, however, was not doomed to fail. Even though the unequal levels of economic, political, and social developments in the GDR and PPR were not favorable for an experiment with an open border, the unexpected events of August 1980 interfered with the

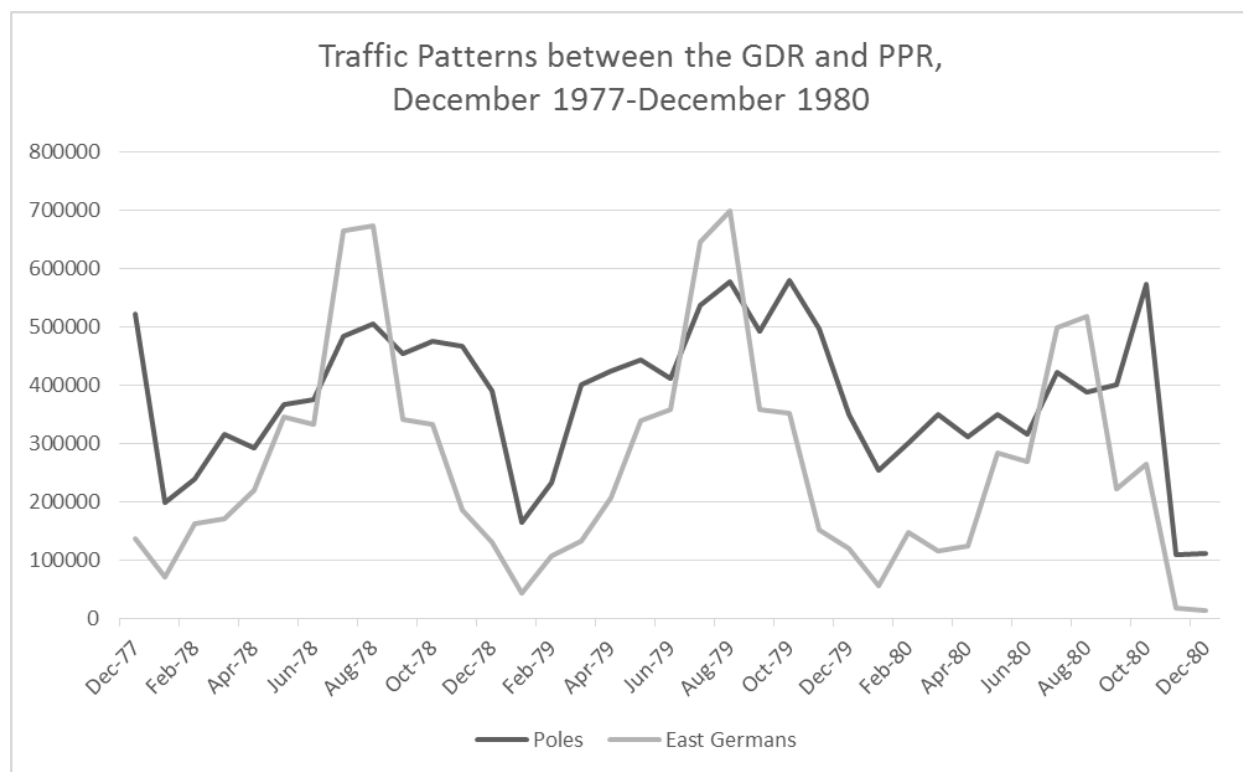
process of rapprochement. The ideological fervor with which Honecker and Gierek embraced the project at first seemed promising for socialist friendship and improvement of neighborly relations. Polish and East German citizens had a chance to get to know each other. In many cases, both sides quickly rejected the initial prejudices and learned that the neighbors were in fact likeable. Friendships flourished and transnational couples multiplied. Also, a closer degree of socialist cooperation attempted to strengthen the image of unity within the bloc in the spirit of international socialism while at the same time satisfying the individual policy goals of the two communist regimes. For the Polish-German case, the question remains, to what extent did the knowledge and possible contacts made in the 1970s ease the next attempt at civic rapprochement in 1990 and 2007. Seeing the Border of Friendship and a common – but very different – experience of real existing socialism as a prelude to Polish-German contacts in the post-reunification era is an important part of understanding their process of reconciliation.

APPENDIX 1: TOURIST TRAFFIC INTENSITY IN THE POLISH-EAST GERMAN  
BORDERLANDS, 1971-1980

Years	to Poland (thousands)	to the GDR (thousands)
1971	68	36
1972	2,950	4,125
1973	2,110	3,210
1974	2,200	3,290
1975	2,310	2,620
1976	2,050	3,415
1977	2,095	2,715
1978	2,100	2,510
1979	1,980	2,010
1980	1,800	1,430

Source: J. Makaro.

APPENDIX 2: TOURIST TRAFFIC BETWEEN THE GDR AND PPR,  
DECEMBER 1977-DECEMBER 1980



Based on data from BStU, MfS HA VI, 16962, 16963, 16964



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